

Additional History Mysteries

By: Dale C. Maley
For: FairburyNews.net
Date: August 18, 2025

Every town has its share of unsolved historical mysteries, and Fairbury has its fair share of mysteries still waiting to be solved.

One of the most intriguing mysteries is whether a Native American woman who survived the Trail of Tears forced march is buried in the Spence Cemetery south of Fairbury.

Wikipedia defines the "Trail of Tears" as an ethnic cleansing and forced displacement of approximately 60,000 people of the "Five Civilized Tribes" between 1830 and 1850 by the United States government. As part of the Indian removal, members of the Cherokee, Muscogee (Creek), Seminole, Chickasaw, and Choctaw nations were forcibly removed from their ancestral homelands in the Southeastern United States to newly designated Indian Territory west of the Mississippi River after the passage of the Indian Removal Act in 1830. The Cherokee removal in 1838 (the last forced removal east of the Mississippi) was brought on by the discovery of gold near Dahlonega, Georgia, in 1828, resulting in the Georgia Gold Rush.

James Spence (1797-1881) and his wife Susannah Spence (1803-1879) are buried in Spence Cemetery, south of Fairbury. Susannah was part Native American. Her mother, who was a full-blooded Native American, may also be buried in an unmarked grave in Spence Cemetery. Her mother, Elizabeth Pridmore Aquatake Quatie Rishton, walked and survived the "Trail of Tears."

At this time, no documentation supports whether or not Elizabeth Pridmore Aquatake Quatie Rishton was buried in the Spence Cemetery. It is possible that the older woman came to live with her daughter south of Fairbury and was then buried in an unmarked grave in this cemetery.

Another mystery is the origin and demise of a ghost town named Cassville somewhere between Fairbury and Pontiac. An 1847 map of the state of Illinois shows a dirt road running from Middleport to Pontiac. Fairbury is not shown on this map because it was not founded until 1857 when the Peoria & Oquawka Railroad ran its tracks from Peoria to the Indiana border.

Middleport, in that era, was the county seat of Iroquois County. In 1865, the name of Middleport was changed to Watseka in honor of the wife of a Potawatomi Chief. Livingston County was established in 1837, with Pontiac serving as its county seat. In 1847, this dirt road connected the two county-seat villages.

According to Wikipedia, Lewis Cass (1782-1866) was a United States Army officer and politician. He represented Michigan in the United States Senate and served in the

Cabinets of two U.S. Presidents, Andrew Jackson and James Buchanan. He was also the 1848 Democratic presidential nominee. A slave owner himself, he was a leading spokesman for the doctrine of popular sovereignty, which at the time held the idea that people in each U.S. state should have the right to decide whether to permit slavery as a matter of states' rights. Lewis Cass lost the 1848 presidential election to Zachary Taylor.

An early settler likely attempted to create a new village, which he named Cassville in honor of Lewis Cass. Like many small villages, Cassville probably became a ghost town when a railroad was not built through it. Except for the 1847 Illinois map, the town of Cassville has very few references in published historical documents.

Another mystery surrounds what happened to the missing years of the large bound paper Blade newspaper books. The Fairbury Blade newspaper used to save one copy of each issue and then had someone bind them up into large bound volumes. Typically, each book contained one year's worth of the Blade. The Blade staff used to refer to these books to look up historical information or to create the Looking Back section of the paper.

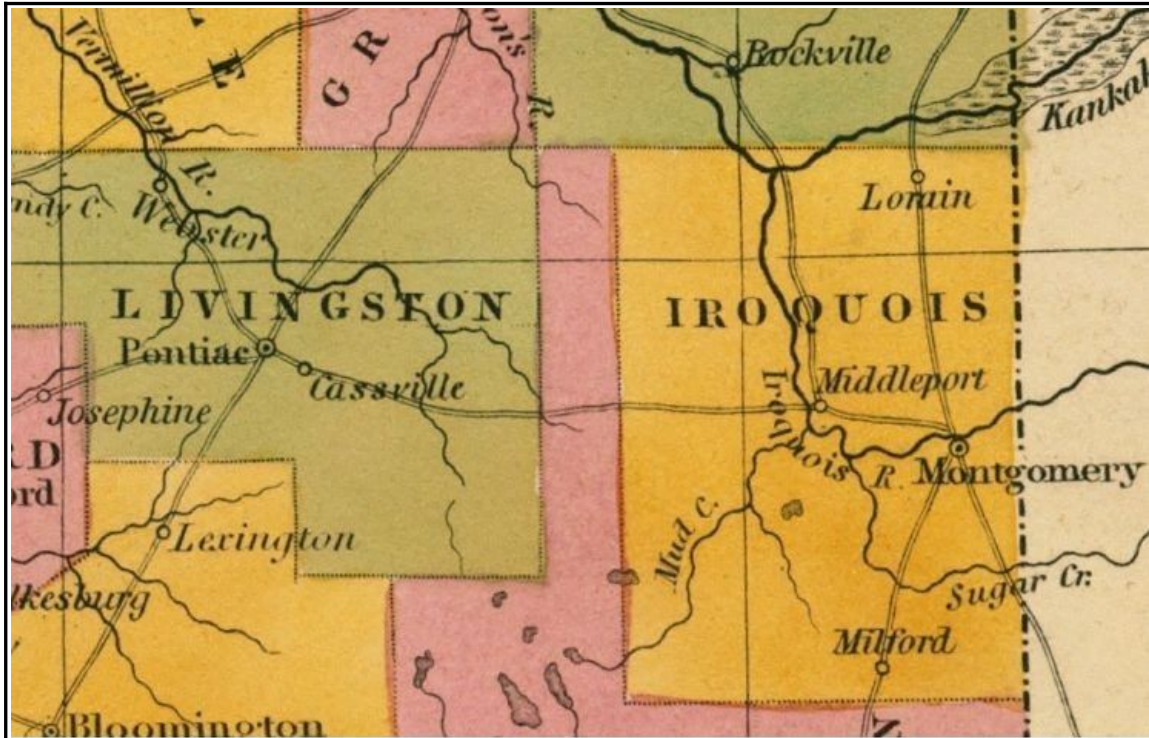
The Blade also sent a copy of every issue to the University of Illinois, where they were scanned onto microfilm. The Dominy Memorial Library then got a copy of these microfilm rolls for public use. A few years ago, these microfilm rolls were sent to an outside firm, which scanned them to make the newspaper available online through the library's website. Unfortunately, not all of the images or old photos scanned well for the microfilm, and therefore, they are not legible in the online version. The old Blade books still feature good photos, and museum staff can use a digital camera to capture these images.

Before the Blade quit publication, they graciously donated all the large bound volumes of the Blade to the Fairbury Echoes Museum. All of these books are preserved in the archives of the Fairbury Echoes Museum. Unfortunately, twelve years of the big books could not be found when they were donated to the Fairbury Echoes Museum. The missing years are 1880, 1882, 1886, 1888, 1896, 1904, 1908, 1913, 1914, 1915, 1918, and 1955.

These large books were relocated around Fairbury a couple of times over the years as the Blade changed locations between the east and west ends of Locust Street, between Second and Third Streets. They were all stored in the basement of the Fairbury Paint Store, which was just east of the Bank of Pontiac, during one of these moves. If anyone knows the location of any of these missing books, please contact the Fairbury Echoes Museum at 692-2191.

Another fascinating mystery dates back over 100 years. Fairbury made the national newspapers in January of 1917. Two citizens of Fairbury, Stephen Young and Sophia Lancaster, died in the same week. Each of these Fairbury citizens was purported to be 117 years old. Both of these individuals were African Americans who were formerly enslaved. They were each buried in the oldest section of Graceland Cemetery, located on South Seventh Street.

Statistically, it is unlikely that either of these two Fairbury residents was 117 years of age in 1917. Each of them reported differing dates of birth in the U.S. Census over the years. No records can currently be found that pinpoint the absolute ages of these Fairbury citizens. Perhaps someday, some records will be found that validate their actual ages.



1847 Illinois map showing the existence of the village of Cassville somewhere between Middleport (now Watseka) and Pontiac. In that era, Pontiac was the county seat of Livingston County and Middleport was the county seat of Iroquois County. This dirt road connected the two county seats.